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## Role of Learner Support Services in ODL Institutions of Assam with special reference to Directorate of Distance Education, Dibrugarh University

### Abstract:

The paper highlights various Learner Support Services (LSS) provided by the ODL institutions of Assam, with special reference to the Directorate of Distance Education, Dibrugarh University. The study suggests that most of the learners of Directorate of Distance Education are overall satisfied regarding the receipt of study materials and information, pre-admission counseling, Induction meeting, Self Learning Materials, the Counseling Sessions and the dealings of the Officials of DDE, DU in response to their queries

### 1.0 Introduction

In Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system, learner support services (LSS) play an instrumental role in making two way communications possible and in the expansion of ODL system across the country. It is an important subsystem of ODL system. The term 'learner support' means the range of human and nonhuman resources to guide and facilitate educational transaction. It complements and supplements the mass produced instructional materials. The Learner Support Service comprises activities of finalization of admission process, dispatch of course materials and post-admission support. Some of the key responsibilities of LSS are

- to create an environment conducive to Distance Learning;
- to facilitate the Distance Learning Method;
- to motivate the learners to continue their education;
- to encourage socialization and to promote team work and team spirit and
- to improve the educational standards of learners. [Sharma (2002)]

With the establishment of IGNOU's study centre in the Gauhati University campus in the year 1986, the ODL system was introduced in Assam. At present IGNOU has set up its Regional Centres at all the State capitals of the NE States and it established study centres in a number of Colleges and Educational Institutions of the region. Krishna Kanta Handique State Open University is the only State Open University of Assam which was established in the year 2006 at Guwahati. There are three Directorates of Distance Education in Assam. One is attached to Gauhati University and was established in 1998; another is attached to Dibrugarh University and was established in 2001 and the third one is attached to Tezpur University and was established in the year 2011. The Gauhati and Dibrugarh Universities are State Universities and the Tezpur University is Central University. Moreover, some private Universities, like Sikkim Manipal University, set up their study centres all over Assam to run different programmes through distance mode. In this study, we are not considering the various contact centres of IGNOU and other private Universities. Hence the study is delimited to the KKHOU and the three Directorates or Institutions of Open Learning.

Providing support services in a structured and organized way is not an easier task. It has to be designed and developed in such a way so that it can facilitate the learners. It should be accessible, convenient and usable to the learners as well as to the counsellors and it should be cost effective. The aims of this study are to explain the nature of the support services provided to the distance learners by these institutions and present a number of suggestions to enhance learner support in the Directorate of Distance Education, Dibrugarh University.

### 2.0 Significance of the Study:

Distance learners are isolated and independent in nature. They can not get immediate clarification for their doubts that come up during their study. So it is necessary to provide some support to the distance learners to guide them.

The success of ODL highly depends on the support services provided by the system. Otherwise there would not have been any difference between today's ODL and yesterday's correspondence education. Again in today's era of competition among various modes of education including the market oriented and privatized ones, it has become essential to incorporate all new trends available in Distance mode of Education around the globe in order to be in the fray. .

In this paper, the researcher tries to identify the role of LSS in the Distance Education Institutions of Assam. The prime focus has been given on the Directorate of Distance Education, Dibrugarh University.

An overview of the research in Distance Education (DE) shows that most of the research works are descriptive in nature, Naidu (2007). The aim of most of the works is to describe the DE phenomenon. Sharma (2002) carried out case study on the Directorate of Distance Education, Maharhi Dayanand Univerity, Rohtak, India, and found that the learners should be fully aware of the ODL system before joining. Otherwise, they may find themselves in an unfamiliar situation. Salih Usun (2004) mentioned in his article "Learner Support Services in Distance Education System, A Case Study of Turkey" that a distance education program must design and applicant effective learner support services and systems. Unfortunately, in many distance education systems, more resources are invested in the technical system at the expense of the learner support system. Equivalent or more resources should be invested in the learner support system if the distance education enterprise is to be successful. A few studies were conducted on Online- learning and learners perception towards E-learning and Web-based instruction. In the Indian Journal of Open Learning during 1992-2005, only 24 papers were published on Learner Support Services, out of which 16 were published on Electronic media and E-learning, (University News, 45(16), April 16-22, 2007). Review of these literatures reveals that, studies on Learner Support Services are not adequate in the Indian context and thus paving for enough scope to further study in the field. An in-depth study on Learner Support Services can focus on the real need of the learner and consequently on the real need of the institution. Thus this study can be utilized for institutional monitoring and developmental purposes.

In Dibrugarh University, very few studies have been carried out on distance education. Mahanta, Biswas and Hazarika (2009) have made a case study on Quality Assurance of Directorate of Distance Education, DU and found that the staff including the counselors should be trained regularly keeping the new developments in mind and to maintain quality support to the learners. Mahanta and Borkotokey (2008) have made a study on the practice of counseling provided in ODL institutions and advocated that Dialogue method could be implemented for a more effective and relevant counseling. Hazarika & Gogoi (2008) carried out a study on the "Awareness and Attitude of the College Students towards Open and Distance Learning" and found that the present scenario is not encouraging. Another study carried out by Borgohain (2007) on Category-wise Enrolment in Distance Education under IGNOU in Assam. She found that the enrolment growth in Distance Education during the period 2001-2006 is declining. So, it was found to be necessary to carry out more studies in this area.

### **3. Objectives:**

The main objectives of the present study were to:

- i. To study the nature of LSS provided by the various ODL Institutions of Assam.
- ii. To study the learners' view regarding learners support services provided by Directorate of Distance Education, Dibrugarh University.
- iii. To examine the attitudes and satisfaction level of the teachers of Directorate of Distance Education, Dibrugarh University.

### **4. Methodology:**

#### **4.1 Research methods:**

The nature of the data to be collected demands Survey and Descriptive research method. That is why in this particular study this method would be adopted.

#### **4.2 Sample:**

1. One faculty and one officer from each ODL institution are selected by purposive random sampling.
2. 600 distance learners were selected following purposive random sampling method for the study.
3. Thirty (50) teachers associated with DDEDU were selected following stratified sampling method for the study.

#### **4.3 Tools:**

One semi-structured interview schedule was prepared for the faculty and officer of KKHOU, IDOL-GU, DDE-TU and DDE-DU to collect various information.

Two structured questionnaires consisting 12 and 21 items were prepared for the teachers and the distance learners respectively.

#### **4.4 Procedure for Data Collection:**

To collect information with regard to the first objective, documents, primary sources and web-sites were consulted. The investigator conducted face to face interview with the faculty and officer of DDEDU and for other three institutions interviews were conducted by telephone and e-mail.

To achieve the second objective, a structured questionnaire was prepared. The data from the learner were collected during the weekend counselings, examination form fill up and final year form fill up. To collect data from the counselors of the Directorate, the investigator visited DDEDU and all the departments of the University personally.

#### 4.5 Analysis of the Results:

Data collected through documents and primary sources were analyzed using suitable techniques.

### 5. Results and Discussions:

#### 5.1. Learner Support Services:

Learner Support Services provides academic and non-academic support to the learners in pursuing a programme through distance mode. Garrison (1989) observed that in distance education "support is concerned with a range of human and non-human resources to guide and facilitate the educational transaction". The dominant feature of distance education is the physical and often temporal distance that separates the teacher and learner. Because distance learners are often placed in a unique situation in which neither teachers nor fellow learners are physically present to clarify, discuss, or provide feedback, effective distance education requires a sound learner support system (Gunawardena, 1992).

##### 5.1.1. Common Learner Support Services of ODL Institutions of Assam:

- Information (face-to-face, through telephone, letters, TV, news papers and internet).
- Academic and Non-Academic Counseling.
- Assignments.
- Study Centres.
- Library facility.
- Web-site.
- Dispatch of the materials by hand or by post.

**5.1.2 Specific Learner Support Services of ODL Institutions of Assam:** The various LSS provided by different ODL Institutions of Assam are given in the Table-I:

**Table- I: Specific Learner Support Services of ODL Institutions of Assam:**

KKHOU	IDOLGU	DDETU	DDEDU
a. Toll Free Telephone Facility.	a. Several Telephone Lines.	a. Induction Meeting	a. Only one Telephone and mobile numbers of the faculties and employees.
b. Free education to the prisoners,	b. Induction Meeting		b. Induction Meeting
c. Radio Broadcast Programme -Ekalabya,	c. Scholarship-- according to the university rule.		c. Scholarships -according to the university rule,
d. Bulk SMS.	d. Community Radio – Radio Luit only for 10 km radius.		d. Computer-Lab with internet facility,
e. Community Radio- Jyan Taranga,	e. Bulk SMS.		e. Bulk SMS.
f. Audio and Audio- Visual Programmes.	f. SMS service		f. Radio Programme- Gyanmalinee,
g. Smart KKHOU Internet Radio.	g. Multi –Media Support (under progress).		g. Multi-media CDs/DVDs
h. An Open Access Journals Search Engine (OAJSE).	h. e-portal.		h. Mobile phone service specially for the Radio Broadcast
i. Learners Social Network Site.	i. Discussion Forum		i. A magazine named Mohona
j. Special Phone in Programme			

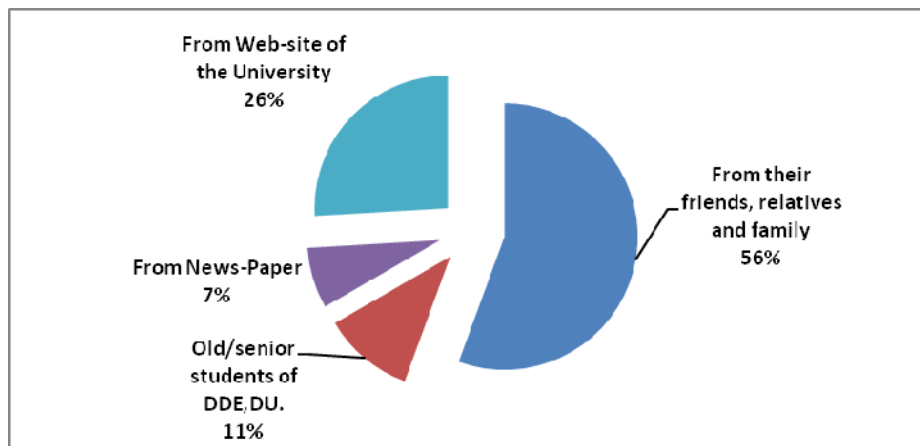
#### 5.2. Learners View, Attitude, and Satisfaction regarding the Learner Support Services provided by the Directorate:

Based on 600 learners of DDEDU we get:

- 50 % of the learners received the study material on time, 11% did not provide any response and the rest of learners (39%) did not receive the study material on time.
- 76.9 % of the learners attended the Induction Meeting.

- Learners who attended the Induction Meeting studied the SLM before attending the counseling session.
- A significant number of learners (56%) reported that they got information about DDEDU from their friends and relatives. Another significant number of learners (26%) got information from the Web-site of the University and a very few (7%) learners got information from News Papers.

The Fig-I shows the percentage of Learners, how they get information about DDEDU:



**Fig-I: Learners get information about DDEDU**

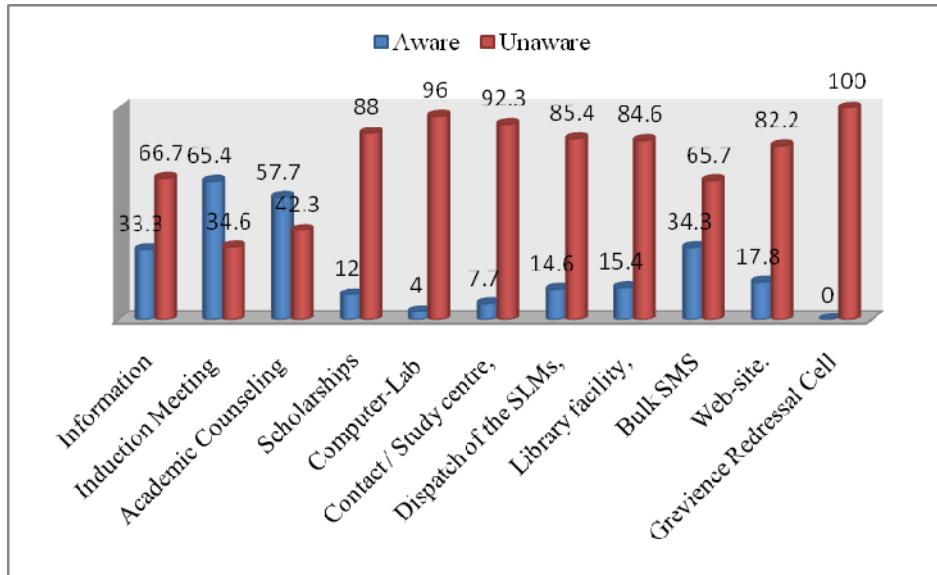
- Most of the learners (92%) were not aware about the various supports of the DDE before attending the Induction Meeting.
- 95% learners were not aware about the academic counseling sessions and tutoring (face-to-face, through telephone and internet) before attending the Induction Meeting.
- All the learners (100%) were not aware about the scholarships to the needy learners, before attending the Induction Meeting.
- According to 96.2% learners, the Brochure of DDEDU contains all the necessary information.
- Only 30% of the learners discussed with the people of DDE before admission regarding courses and merits/demerits of distance education.
- The Table-II shows the satisfaction level of the learners regarding various aspects of DDEDU:

**Table-II: The Satisfaction Level of the Learners Regarding Various Aspects.**

Grades	Very good	Good	Average	Poor	Very poor
The Induction Meeting	69%	23%	8%	-	-
The Counseling Sessions	15%	62%	23%	-	-
Self Learning Materials	34%	53%	13%	-	-
Response of the Officials of DDEDU	33%	61%	6%	-	-

- Awareness of the Learners regarding the various learner support services are represented by the following Bar Diagram (Fig-II) -

**Fig-II: Awareness of the Learners regarding the various LSS of DDEDU**

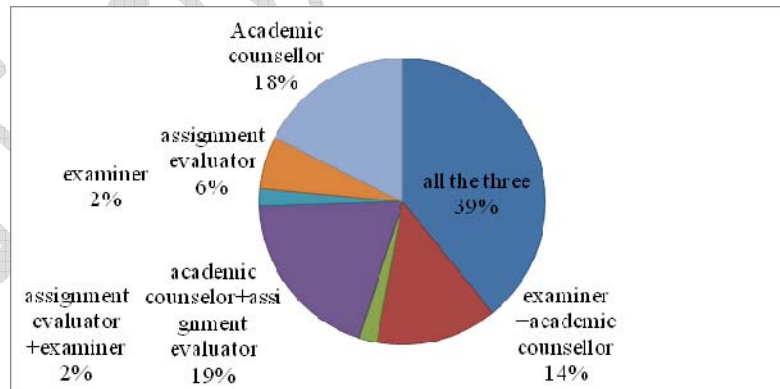


In regard to awareness of the learners regarding various learner support services, Fig-II reveals that most (an average of 88 %) of the learners were not aware about the various supports like computer laboratory, Contact/Study centres, scholarship, dispatch of SLMs, library facility etc. All the learners (100%) were not aware about the grievance redressal cell. However, a significant majority of the learners (65.4 % and 57.7%) were aware about the supports like Induction Meeting and Academic Counseling sessions.

### 5.3 Attitudes and satisfaction level of the Counselors DDEDU:

The data collected through the questionnaire for the counselors were analyzed and it revealed that:

1. A large number of the counselors (45%) were not able to understand the technical terms of the ODL system such as - ODL, Induction Meeting and LSS etc.
2. The following figure shows the various roles played by the counselors in DDE,DU.



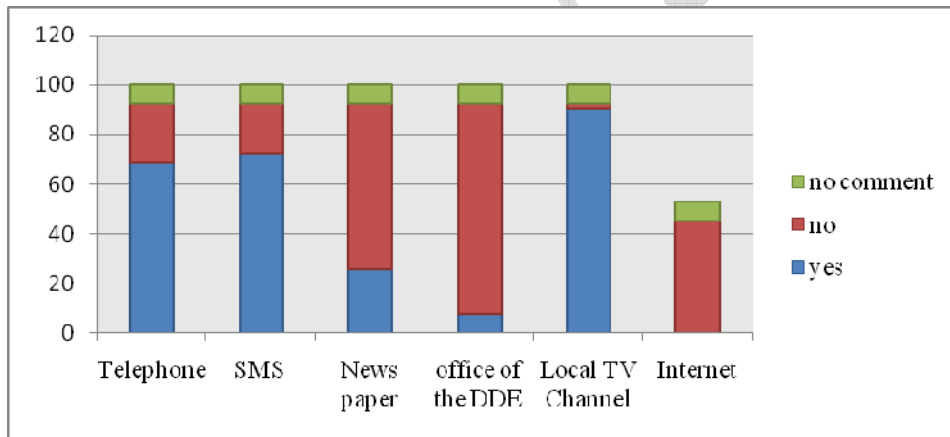
**Fig-III: Distribution of the role of the Counselors**

3. From the Fig-III, we can conclude that only 39% counselors were fully involved and the rest (61%) were partially involved in the system.
4. Only 29% of the counselors provide comments regarding the induction meeting. (Or equivalently only 29% counselors attended the induction meeting.)
5. Only 7% of the counselors attended training programmes organized by IGNOU.
6. The Table-III indicates the counselors' views regarding the differences of ODL from conventional mode.

**Table-III: The Views of Counselors Regarding Difference of ODL from Conventional Mode**

Difference of ODL from Conventional mode	Yes (%)	No (%)
Absence of regular classes	23.5	76.5
Can Study in their own pace	37.3	62.7
Absence of peer group learning	66.7	33.3
Quality of ODL is inferior	84.3	15.7

7. Most of the counselors remarked that inferior quality of ODL and absence of peer group learning are the main differences of ODL than conventional mode. A few counselors remarked that absence of regular classes and learners' ability to study in their own pace are important differences of ODL than conventional mode.
8. 44% of the counselors felt the assignments of distance education to be an extra burden as they are having sufficient workload in the conventional system.
9. It was found that the counselors have not been aware about the various means by which the Directorate provides the different information to its learners. The following figure (Fig-IV) shows views of the counselor regarding various means of information.



**Fig-IV: Views Regarding Various Means of Information**

The 90% of the counselors remarked that the Directorate had provided information by giving advertisement in the local TV channels, but in reality the Directorate had not provided information through the local TV channels during the period of data collection. It started using TV media for the purpose only from the session 2012-13. Moreover, DDE provides information through Web-site, but no counselors were aware about it. A majority (an average of 76%) of the counselors commented that the learners had acquired information neither from Newspaper nor from the office of the Directorate. But the Directorate had been continuously putting the advertisements in Newspapers and learners were also able to collect information from the office (information desk) of the Directorate.

## 6.0 Conclusions:

In this study, we have found that as an ODL institution KKHOU provides very strong learner support services while compared to the other ODL institutions of Assam.

Most of the learners of Directorate of Distance Education are overall satisfied regarding the receipt of study materials and information, pre-admission counseling, Induction meeting, Self Learning Materials, the Counseling Sessions and the dealings of the Officials of DDE, DU in response to their queries. The Induction Meeting has a noticeable positive impact on the reading of study materials before attending the counseling sessions. Some non-academic counseling sessions should be provided to the learners regarding the availability of the various supports of the Directorate as a significant majority of the learners were not aware about the various supports provided by the Directorate. Moreover, it was found that a significant number of counselors of DDE were not familiar with the ODL system and most of them were not aware about the various LSS provided to its learners by the Directorate.

They need more orientation in this regards. So, DDE should take some effective measures viz., organizing orientations / workshops for them.

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### **Shrutidhara Mahanta**

Directorate of Distance Education,  
Dibrugarh University,  
Dibrugarh, India-786004,  
email: [shrutidm@gmail.com](mailto:shrutidm@gmail.com)

### **Mukut Hazarika**

\*\*Department of Education,  
Dibrugarh University,  
Dibrugarh, India-786004,  
email: [mukuthazarika@hotmail.com](mailto:mukuthazarika@hotmail.com)